

Conference Report

6th Annual Jeddah Psychiatry Symposium in collaboration with The Saudi Psychiatric Association

Psychosexual disorders: from recognition to management

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Abstract The Saudi Psychiatric Association in collaboration with Dr Erfan and Bagedo Hospitals took an inspiring and courageous step to propose the title of 'Psychosexual disorders from recognition to management', for their 6th Annual Jeddah Symposium. Dr Erfan & Bagedo General Hospitals include a number of specialties other than psychiatry. Therefore the conference offered an opportunity for endocrinologists, paediatricians, neuropsychiatrists, adolescent psychiatrist and gynecologists to come together. What was particularly thought provoking was that predominately Islamic society in Saudi Arabia would not previously have experienced an open symposium, be it medical or public, on this topic. The very nature of the subject matter required open and frank discussion about endocrinological, physiological, emotional and desirous aspects of human sexual behaviour. This necessarily would take place in the presence of men and women who were health and social care professionals, and who were also followers of the Islamic faith. Such a conference in Jeddah would be expected to attract the attention of the popular media, as perhaps it may be considered un-Islamic, even though it was essential for progress in health and social care. The Muslim academic speakers eloquently demonstrated how the conference aims and objectives were in fact entirely consistent with an Islamic world view.

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The Arabic title for the congress was phrased to reflect what was: 'Intimate relationships within marriage from recognition to management'. Dr Mona Sawaf, an eminent local Psychiatrist, was the first to raise the discrepancy between the English and Arabic versions, and questioned the intentions of the conference organizers to obscure the use of the term 'sexual' in order to secure local government permission to hold the symposium. To this, Professor Mawgoud responded that there was no intention to obscure the subject matter of the symposium as being sexuality, but rather within an Arabic translation, the only way to express sexuality is culturally determined to be within a marital relationship.

The conference was inspired by Professor Mawgoud and given overwhelming support by Dr Efan, Director of the Dr Efan and Bagedo Hospitals. Their purpose was indeed to begin an important debate on human relationships and sexuality, something that is highly respected and revered in Islamic teachings as it is in many religious teachings. Indeed, the opening statement from the organizing committee stated:

'From creation to present day, the relationship between man and woman has been a subject of privacy and intimacy. It has developed rapidly over the centuries. The importance of such a relationship was highlighted by our Prophet Mohamed, peace be upon him, who encourages open dialogue in this area as there is no shyness in asking about such topics. In the last 50 years there were drastic changes in attitudes, awareness, aetiology, diagnosis and treatment of this physical

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relationship, namely in the form of psychosexual disorders and their management. During the symposium the new approach from diagnoses to treatment will be discussed.'

This report summarises the content of the meeting, perspectives that were discussed, challenges presented to the audience and by the audience to the presenters, necessarily the authors highlight experience of giving presentations in this setting, specifically on the topics on which we spoke. These topics included psychosexual disorders in people with schizophrenia and its treatment, the use of pornography by men and risks to them and society, and psychotherapy and culture.

The meeting was held at the Jeddah Hilton. The opening ceremony held in the evening was heralded by a great deal of media interest both television and radio stations.

Interviews were taken from speakers and organizers, and some concerns were expressed in the media about the consistency of the venture with Islamic values. Specific conference topics such as gender re-assignment and disorders of gender identity were taken up by the media for close scrutiny. It was not, therefore, surprising that the speakers and audience took great care in addressing the location of health care issues, within a social and religious context, as well as on evidence based principles.

Many of the talks were in Arabic with English translations that we were informed did not capture the deeper meanings that resonated for Muslims when the words were spoken in Arabic. We could see the passion and compassion with which speakers appealed to the audience to engage in this subject in a mature and progressive manner in order to improve health and wellbeing. Professor El-Rakhawy gave a particularly impressive account of sex as a language in health and disease. He was followed by Professor Mawgoud, who gave an overview of psychosexual disorders. Within this overview, Professor Mawgoud took care to set out the international diagnostic criteria which were used to identify psychosexual disorders, including disorders of gender identity, disorders of sexual desire, personality disorders, and heterosexual psychosexual disorders and transsexual issues. There were specific talks on gender identity disorders in the children and adolescents (Dr Nihal Erfan) and on the psychopharmacology for the treatment of sexual disorders (Professor Ghanem). This latter talk gave a systematic approach to the investigation, diagnosis and management of sexual disorders in a gynecological clinic and in a psychosexual clinic.

More specific presentations addressed the epidemiology of psychosexual disorders. The authors of this report presented papers on the relationship between cultural and sexual disorders; violence, male pornography and its effect on sexual health and general health; psychotherapy across cultures and the implications for psychosexual disorders; and we ran a workshop on psychosexual disorders in people with severe and enduring mental illness. This workshop gave rise to a great deal of interest in community psychiatry in the west and its lack of capacity to address housing and social care issues. Gender identity disorders accompanying severe mental illness emerged as a key area of concern that warranted appropriate intervention by mental health teams. Psychosexual needs of those with severe mental illness, it was acknowledged, may have been neglected due to stigma and yet other important interventions to stabilize mental states were necessary before addressing psychosexual disorders among the severely mentally ill. The workshop was undertaken in a conventional format of a presentation followed by two problems with clinical material for the delegates to discuss in small groups; male and female groups met separately and the female group had a separate facilitator, a lecturer in forensic mental health from Barts Medical School (Dr Roberts) and a male lecturer in transcultural mental health care from Barts Medical School (Dr Warfa) respectively. The presentation was given by Professor Bhui, who also facilitated the discussion and knowledge transfer in the group discussions. The group was quick to identify stigma, treatment of psychosis and co-morbidities with personality disorders, general identity disorders and severe mental illness. It was proposed a precise and careful assessment was required before intervention. One of the case vignettes also included marital discord between two people

with severe mental illness and how domestic violence or forms of punishment may emerge, particularly if there is lack of interest in sexual affairs or in the relationship from one party. Some of the group (male) felt this situation would never arise in the Islamic context, whereas the women identified with this difficulties and were frank and open in their small discussion group about how common this situation may be. In the small group discussions there was frank and open debate about the reasons why marital discord had emerged. The group generally agreed that for women with severe mental illness, marital problems and sexual problems may in part arise from the demands of the role of a sexual partner, mother, and housewife with multiple domestic and paternal responsibilities, as well as the need to pursue work for income.

The presentation by Dr Roberts gave epidemiological data on the effect of male use of pornography, and risks of male aggression to women. This was well received and immediately considered by the audience for its relevance to the local religious and cultural context. One question was: is it still rape if it takes place within a marriage? The nature of violence against women and domestic violence was very openly discussed both within and outside of marriage. The nature of homosexuality as a disorder and as variation of sexual preference was aired with a wide range of views emerging, although its expression as a normal variance of sexual preference was not a popular view, as it was considered anti Islamic, just as homosexuality has been condemned in Christian and other religious teachings, yet it is found in all societies. This also linked well with the talks on gender identity among adolescents, and provided material for much fruitful reflection and exposure to a wide range of views, all expressed in a balanced and respectful manner.

Professor Mawgoud account of transsexual disorders, including gender reassignment and distinctions between these and fetishism and gender identity disorders was a state of the art account that fueled more debate and discussion about the nature of human existence of relationships of gender and sexuality. Professor Bhui's presentation gave account of the impact of culture on the generation and presentation of psychosexual disorders; we also considered how culture influenced the form of intervention and psychotherapeutic approaches; these must consider health beliefs, attitudes, values, religion, spirituality, models of mind, models of healing and recovery, models of distress, negotiation at multiple levels between the therapist and the patient of the nature and construction of their distress, taking account of the wider systemic influences of family, society and the embodied self.

An unusual feature of the conference of psychosexual disorders was the active integration of biomedical, psychological and social perspectives. The conference was greatly enhanced by andrologists, endocrinologists, psychosexual therapists and gynecologists as well as general medical doctors for whom the conference gave greater depth to their understanding of psychosexual disorders. The manner in which presentations from Islamic speakers were also contextualized with Koranic text was beguiling in part. We were repeatedly informed that the English translations presented did not capture the deeper religious spiritual and existential aspects of the communications that took place in Arabic. The discussions in Arabic also addressed cultural clashes and sub-cultural clashes but always contained by an Islamic framework of understanding and seeing the world. There was space to think further as delegates from abroad, and those who were not Muslim, were not hindered or constrained from expressing a view.

The conference captured local imagination and appeared in the news media on the one hand as an important educational experience but on the other as a challenge to Islamic values. Understandably transsexualism, gender identity disorders and homosexuality received more attention than was due, given the space these topics took up in the conference. The intimate emotional and treatment orientated aspects of the conference were given less time perhaps as these appeared not so challenging of local social thought.

The conference was followed by an informal tour of Dr Erfan and Bagedo Hospitals. We were graciously shown around the rehabilitation facilities. Of particular interest was a drug rehabilitation unit in which CBT treatments were applied using exposure to cues that what would precipitate drug use. As part of response prevention techniques, Islamic forms of transcendental meditation were used whilst patients lay down and relaxed to learn to manage their triggers. Their faith was used to strengthen their resolve to not respond to cues, but only for those whose faith was strong already. These techniques were being audited when we visited. The preliminary findings were optimistic that re-admission and re-offending rates were diminished by linking the medical intervention with social norms and belief systems within an Islamic context. These debates were supported strongly by psychiatrists from Egypt, specifically in Cairo where the World Psychiatric Associations Meeting had recently been held.

We were also heartened to hear of the International links between Saudi Arabia and other countries in terms of educational developments. For example, a new college of nursing is established and there was a strong interest in transcultural psychiatry in linking culture and human experience with distress. This was because of the explicit links that could be made between the nature of psychopathology, human interest across cultures but also in transferring knowledge interventions and systems of care to diverse cultural contexts at a time when international psychiatry is taking on an increasingly universal approach to development and transfer of psychiatric interventions. The conference reinforced the need for a deeper understanding of cultural context, indigenous systems of thinking and healing and care in the transfer of technologies from one social and cultural context to another.

After the conference there was great media interest in particular in relation to what used to be referred to as 'sexual deviations'. In the first week following the conference, one of the daily newspapers raised the topic on its front page, reporting on several Saudi women who had undergone sex change operations to be live as men. A leading magazine gave a sympathetic account of transsexualism and described the story of a women who wished to live as a man, and then offered supportive advice about medical, psychological, religious, immigration and legal issues. The press interest persisted from around the world, and showed how a symposium, with commitment from the organizers to care for the cultural issues whilst encouraging debate, can lead to the opening up of a discourse that improves well being.